DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 348 HE 019 844

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TITLE Why Deans, Chairmen, and Other Rascals Sometimes Seem (and Maybe Are) Uncreative.
INSTITUTION American Association for Higher Education, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Oct 86
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM American Association for Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20036.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT AAHE Bulletin; p8-9 Oct 1986

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Responsibility; *College Environment; *Creativity; *Deans; *Department Heads; Financial Problems; Higher Education; *Innovation; Motivation

ABSTRACT

Reasons why it is difficult for deans and department heads to be creative are identified. While some deans and department heads are not creative in thinking and acting, others are creative but their creativity is not readily discernible. Their work is often slow and undramatic, consisting of tasks such as gradual position reallocations and shifts of graduate stipends. However, some deans and chairpersons resist change because they think change is wrong. A very important reason that deans and chairpersons often seem uncreative is that some universities or divisions within universities are not financially healthy. Frequently, daily life in a college or department is being frugal and maneuvering because there is not enough money to retain staff and maintain equipment. A dean or department head may be creative in keeping a unit from disintegration, but this creativity may not be evident by viewing the unit/department from the outside. A great deal of an administrator's time is devoted to attending meetings, which are necessary and valuable but disadvantageous to creativity. In addition, a department head with a visionary plan and a clear operational procedure may not be able to get the enthusiasm of faculty or the approval of supervisors. (SW)

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by Jim W. Corder

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AAHE BULLETIN/OCTOBER

# WHY DEANS, CHAIRMEN, AND OTHER RASCALS SOMETIMES SEEM (and maybe are) UNCREATIVE

by Jim W. Corder

I remember a particular deans' meeting, one of the weekly sessions where we sat with the academic vice-president. We had mostly rampaged through the day's agenda, and fell to discussing our various problems, frustrations, and shortcomings. A central question kept recurring. I cannot recapture the precise wording of the question, but I think it may fairly be phrased in this way: Why aren't chairmen (and, by implication, deans) more creative?

I assume this is an important question and a common one. I'd guess some variant of the question will always occur on any given campus in any given academic year when a group of administrators talks about the administrators just below or above them in the administrative hierarchy. I want to propose some answers, though I'd just as soon no one imagines that by doing so I wish to justify the lack of creativity.

First, I should say that deans and chairmen often *are* creative, but they don't always look that way because their most common forms of creativity do not occur in readily discernible ways. Their work is often slow, tedious, and undramatic, consisting of ever-so-gradual position re-allocations, ever-so-slow shifts of graduate stipends from one place to another, ever-so-slow changes made slower by legal regulations and timetables. Occasions for momentous, dramatic new programs, major new research undertakings, numerous new appointments, and similar achievements do not come frequently to single deans and probably even less frequently to single chairmen.

Second, I should acknowledge that probably somewhere in this fair land there are deans and chairmen whose minds are inadequate to conceptualize and whose energies are inadequate to operationalize, if you'll forgive my using that word.

Third, let me remark that in some territories, some people will resist change because they think change is wrong.

Sometimes administrators need change as a way of affirming their identity, but they will encounter many who think otherwise. Give one chairman supervision of a department in which the works of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and other philosophers are taught. Give another supervision of a department in which Shakespeare's plays are taught, and another supervision of a department in which the Scriptures and accompanying commentaries and histories are taught.

In each of these instances, the chairman has in his or her hand what the culture says is a sacred set of texts, already justified, already composed, no longer in the process of being composed—as chemistry, for example, is always being composed. (Actually, of course, Shakespeare's plays are still being composed as new audiences make new meaning from them.) It is at least understandable, if not justifiable, if such a chairman believes that change is often unnecessary because the sacred things are already in place.

Fourth, there's another extremely important reason that deans and chairmen often seem uncreative. Some universities are not financially healthy. Even in those universities that are financially healthy, individual parts often are not. Frequently, daily life in a college or department is a continual scrimping and maneuvering because there is not enough money to keep the college or department one already has, let alone enough to create new ones. At certain seasons, I dare say, the lives of some deans and chairmen become fear-ridden and panicky: "How can we start the fall semester when we don't have enough money for part-time faculty to finish staffing all the courses?" "How can the faculty be freed to do its work when I don't have enough money to get the electronic doohickey fixed?" "How can I get Professor Abercrombie back into research when I don't have any travel money left?" At certain seasons, there is a kind of desperate sickness in the gut that is not at all conducive to creativity.

Fifth, certain disjunctions of experience between them may make a dean look lethargic to a vice-president, a chairman seem slow to a dean. For sometimes obvious, sometimes mysterious reasons, on almost any campus some departments are more widely favored around the campus, while other departments are relatively poor and unfavored. If, let us say, a dean from a favored department looks upon a chairman from an unfavored department, the dean may not be able to see that the chairman has been exercising extraordinary creativity just to hold off an immobilizing torpor. I should try to illustrate what I mean.

I remember a colleague who was chairman of an English Department in the late 1960s and into the mid

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1970s. During the years he was chairman, the number of undergraduate majors in English dropped by about 75% (as it did in many other universities in the same years). The number of graduate stipends available dropped from thirty-five to ten during the same years, and the number of faculty dropped from thirty-four to sixteen. He could not, in conscience, argue for more stipends or for new faculty.

**Most people probably have a squelch-factor tolerance level. Once that level has been exceeded, they are far less likely to try out any new ideas and plans.**

Meanwhile, the faculty, not uniformly strong to commence with, grew sad and often bitter and resistant to change. They did not want to change, in some instances, because they felt the barbarians at the gates had already brought more change than was tolerable. Often, I think, there is a magic season during which a department or a college can achieve marvelous change, but if a department or a college misses that season, significant change may not be possible except by the slowest means. In that case, it's conceivable that a dean or chairman should be congratulated if the unit avoids disintegration.

Sixth, deans and chairmen sometimes seem, and are, less than creative because of the extraordinary usurpation of their time. Anyone could itemize the times spent on matters other than imaginative planning and doing, but most would be horrified to see the results. Besides, administrators are not supposed to complain about usurpation of their time—time is the first gift they're supposed to give.

Nevertheless, for the sake of example, I've taken an arbitrary three-month period when I was a dean to show the time spent in conferences. During that period, I had 229 individual visits with chairmen, faculty, and students (these are scheduled appointments; the figure does not include drop-in company), 42 administrative meetings of one kind or another, 17 committee meetings, 18 extracurricular events, 6 graduate oral examinations, 31 interviews with faculty candidates, 2 trips out of town, 4 speeches to give, and a partidge in a pear tree. Such time expenditures, ironically, are both necessary and valuable on the one hand and disadvantageous to creativity on the other.

This suggests a corollary problem that at one time or another affects most administrators: I'm referring to the "brush-fire syndrome," which can and does take up all time, and which administrators can come to love—if one is busy putting out brush fires, one can always know that one is important. For later use, I'll refer to brush-fire syndrome activities as BFSA.

Seventh, sometimes deans and chairmen seem uncreative because of what I'll call the "squelch factor." By squelch, I mean any frustration or denial, even for the best of reasons, of an academic idea—for example, a new curricular design, a research program, a new administrative structure. Squelches (Sq) can come from a variety of sources, including faculty inertia, lack of funds, failures of energy or understanding, and elsewhere.

For example, an administrator too preoccupied with BFSA may not be able to give time or attention to a proposal, thus, by inattention, may squelch the enthusiasm of the proposer. A chairman with the most visionary plan and a clear operational procedure for realizing it still cannot always get the enthusiasm of the faculty and vice versa, and it is also true that the chairman may not be able to get his or her dean to listen.

Squelches come in many ways from many sources. I remember three colleagues who, in the early 1970s, designed an initially small-scale undergraduate/graduate program in rhetoric and communication theory, a program that would, I believe, have put them well ahead of their field. They presented the program to their dean. After a cursory look, the dean rejected the program and advised them not to send it through the regular curriculum review channels. No full explanation was ever forthcoming except that he seemed unwilling to entertain the notion that *rhetoric* might mean something good, though he may have had reasons for the denial that he chose not to explain.

But particular squelches are not my point. My point is that most people probably have some kind of squelch-factor tolerance level (SFTL). Once that level has been reached and exceeded, they are far less likely to try out new ideas and plans. I'm bold to say, indeed, that we may take as a given this law of administrative uncreativity:

BFSA ⟶ Inattention ⟶ Sq > SFTL = CADWTMAM*

**CADWTMAM stands for "Chairmen and Deans Won't Try Much Any More.*

Finally, I'll cite a last reason for the apparent lack of creativity. If I am right in what I say, it is potentially the most disturbing and saddening of the possible reasons for a lack of creativity, and the least amenable to correction. This reason is strictly a matter of the mind, and may have no visible causes or solution.

Administrators like to see what they are prone to call the "operationalizing steps" for any academic conception. It's just here that the problem I'm trying to get at occurs. In a university, as opposed to all other places, some people will think that an idea ought to be enough. That, I suppose, is a form of innocence. Nevertheless, a university is the place for ideas, and many will naturally feel that ideas have power to enact themselves. Sometimes, indeed, they do, but mostly they can't, and as a consequence, sometimes people will grow sad or frustrated, perhaps achingly immobilized, because ideas are not self-generative.

No one imagined, I assume, that in this short space I would arrive at a conclusion telling all how to be perpetually creative. But, I do have a last suggestion or two.

I'd guess, for example, that what looks like a lack of creativity may instead be imperception in the eye of the beholder. I'd guess that none of us should decide too quickly about who is and who is not creative, and that we shouldn't judge as if all were the same, living in the same circumstances. I'd guess we should all look closely, pay meticulous attention to each other, and know the circumstances of our diverse academic settings. Only then, if we must, should we use something more precise than a blunt instrument, and more delicate than a squelch. ■

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